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Cobb's Tavern
Sharon, Massachusetts
Norfolk

HABS No. MASS-336

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Massachusetts

Historic American Buildings Survey
Frank Chouteau Brown, District Officer
76 Chestnut Street, Boston, Mass.

THE TAVERN AT COBB'S CORNER

On one of the country's most ancient highways - the old Bay Road in Sharon, Massachusetts - stands Cobb's Tavern, which served in colonial times as a stopping place for travelers en route between Boston and Narragansett Bay.

Cobb's Tavern - now and for many years past a private residence - was the half-way house between Boston and Taunton in the period when the Bay Road was the only shore route from Boston to New York. As such, it boasted a lively trade, for in those days of dusty roads and slow transportation the country tavern was a welcome oasis for the traveler. In fact, Cobb's Tavern with its outbuildings appears to have been one of the largest such establishments in the east, capable of accommodating a circus troupe of 125 people.

The most interesting showpiece of the old tavern is the taproom, which is changed little or not at all since the days when Jonathan Cobb presided over the bar. Those who are accustomed to the polished bars and more elaborate decorations of a later era may be surprised at its appearance, for the room is as spare and unadorned as it possibly could be. The main bar, fifteen feet long, is of soft pine, and so are the counter and the wide-board floor in back of it. A well-worn money-slot in the counter gives access to a drawer underneath. In front of the bar is a long, low seat, almost a part of the bar itself. This faces a fireplace on the opposite side of the rather narrow room, and it is not difficult to picture a row of convivial

souls lined up there on a cold winter evening, toasting their shins before a blazing wood fire while periodically reaching back over their shoulders for a fresh mug of ale or a noggin of rum.

Access to the taproom from outside is gained through a pair of doors which swing inward to make an opening wide enough for a pair of stout companions to stroll through, arm-in-arm, without knocking their elbows. The doors themselves are of soft pine, and their construction is of an early type: two wide vertical boards facing the exterior, backed by a series of dovetailed horizontal boards. The heavy strap hinges are wrought iron, and it seems probable that the ore from which they were made came from the bottom of Lake Massapoag nearby. It is known that much of the iron used in these parts was dredged out of Massapoag. For many years hardware was made in a blacksmith shop located on the Cobb's Tavern property, but the shop was demolished some years ago.

Entering through the taproom doors, the main bar is on the right, and on the left is a small wall desk once used in connection with a Post Office which for some years was located here. Overhead, the ceiling is of plaster, between rough oak beams. At the rear of the taproom is a small bar, which, according to present-day descendants of Jonathan Cobb, was used for serving liquor during the late 1800's, when the family had adopted a somewhat staid attitude toward the innkeeping business. By then the use of the long bar had been discontinued. It is a fortunate and rather surprising circumstance that during this period the old taproom and its appurtenances were left virtually untouched.

CONSTRUCTION

It is evident that the central part of the building, immediately surrounding the most massive of the three chimneys, is considerably older than the rest. In the Library of Congress at Washington, D.C., where a file of photographs of the Tavern, both interior and exterior, may be seen, the only information as to its age is that the structure is "more than 200 years old". The records of the Canton Institution for Savings show Cobb's Tavern as having been built in 1740. There is some evidence that the central part of the building once was located on the other side of the highway - probably long before it was used as a public house.

Details of the original architecture are compatible with the very earliest types of Colonial construction. Cellar walls of dry stone are surmounted by a frame of rough-hewn oak timbers. (The lower floor timbers of the central portion are simply unfinished oak logs, flattened on one side to make a secure seat for the flooring.) The base flooring is of crude oak boards, one inch thick, and over these, in the same direction, is laid a second floor of soft pine boards. Where plaster was used, the laths are hand-cut, of oak. In fact, oak was used throughout the structure except for the finish, and it proved a good choice, for instead of deteriorating with the years it has become so hard that today it is almost impossible to drive a nail into the beams.

All the timbers are pinned with oak pegs. No nails appear in the framing, but the finish is applied with hand-wrought nails of iron.

The roof timbers, of oak like the rest of the frame, are widely-spaced; the heavy oak boarding being depended upon for support in between. This construction, though it obviously was arrived at without the benefit of an engineering formula, proved to be quite sound, for the old roof was adequate to support the almost unprecedented snows of the winter of 1947-48, while more modern roofs (including that of an annex on the tavern barn) were collapsing under the weight of several feet of snow and ice!

EARLY HISTORY

Just how early any part of the present structure existed may never be accurately determined. In the records of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities at Boston is a letter, dated Dec. 16, 1919, in which it is stated that "In 1797 part of the house, even then old, was moved across the street to its present location and there added to." Jeremiah Gould, in his "Annals of Sharon" mentioned above, says "Cobb's Tavern was built by Jonathon Cobb about 1800" but this is patently an error since Cobb acquired it from Elijah Fisher in 1797 and the latter is believed to have operated it as a tavern for some years. It is probable that Jonathon Cobb enlarged the structure considerably about 1800.

It is easier to follow the transfer of the land from one to another than to trace the history of the building itself, for in earlier days, buildings were not usually mentioned in deeds relating to the transfer of real property as they are today, since the land was taken to be the only permanent goods involved in such transactions. According to the records of the Sharon

Assessors of Taxes, the Cobb's Tavern land originally was owned by Richard Hixon, who received it as a grant from the King of England. Edgar M. Hixon, great-grandson of Richard and at one time one of the Assessors of the town, substantiated this from his own family's records.

The present owner has made a search of the earliest deeds on file at the Old Court House in Boston. This search disclosed (Book 40, Page 241), that a large tract of land in the general area was owned jointly by "Richard Hixon, yeoman," and his brother "John Hixon, bricklayer," both of Dorchester, and that on April 17, 1725, "in the 11th year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord, George, King of Britain," the brothers agreed to partition this land between them. The transfer was certified by a justice of the peace on Feb. 7, 1726. Where and how the two brothers acquired the land in the first place is not stated, but we may reasonably assume they came into possession of it through the land grant referred to in the Sharon records.

Richard appears to have retained all of his share of the land until April 4, 1782, when he deeded over two lots to his son, Richard Hixon, Jr. The son paid 80 pounds for a 27-acre lot (Book 134, Page 14) and paid another 20 pounds for a 2 1/4 acre lot (Book 134, Page 117).

Richard Jr. married Mary Stickney, and at his death at the age of 45, his wife inherited the property. She re-married and her name became Eaton. The next transfer was on June 24, 1791, from Jabez Eaton to Elizah Fisher, and on March 1, 1797, Fisher conveyed the property to Jonathon Cobb.

Jonathon was the first of the tavern-keepers in the Cobb

family, but, judging from many reports, Fisher conducted a tavern on the premises before Cobb took over. The evidence would indicate, however, that the building was a small one when Fisher had it, and that Cobb expanded it progressively as the traffic on the Old Bay Road increased.

Jonathon Cobb's son Warren inherited the property in 1867 after his father's death, but his role as tavern-keeper fell short of his father's in terms of years. He died 26 years later, in 1893, and his wife Laura Ann Cobb became the owner. At her death in 1903, her two daughters, Gertrude Cobb and Florence Cobb Murdock inherited the Tavern. Gertrude outlived her sister, and at her own death in 1935 was the sole member of the family residing in the house. The taproom had long since been closed, and the structure that once housed more than a hundred noisy circus performers had become a quiet residence for one elderly maiden lady.

At Gertrude Cobb's death the Tavern and its land left the Cobb family for the first time in 144 years. Its owners since have been, in turn, Silas Cox, Clifford D. Best and the present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Frederic S. Tobey.

Some sixty years have passed, it would appear, since Cobb's Tavern was last open to the public as an eating and drinking place. The death of Warren Cobb in 1895 signalled the end of the tavern era. The Boston Globe, in a feature article Aug. 6, 1905, noted its passing and published a picture of the building, looking much as it does today.

The Globe's story concluded by saying that since the death of Warren Cobb in 1895, the Post Office at East Sharon had been abolished and the tavern closed to the public.

Although a tavern appears to have been operated at the site prior to the acquisition of the property by the Cobb family, it undoubtedly was Jonathon Cobb who started the building program which in the course of time converted the once small structure into one of the roomiest inns of Massachusetts. The original kitchen, a small room panelled entirely in feather-edged soft pine, and equipped with a fireplace and Dutch oven, proved inadequate and a much larger kitchen was added, with a bigger fireplace, a very large Dutch oven and a place for smoking meats and heating water.

At some point during his ownership of the tavern, Jonathon Cobb erected a "swing sign" rather elaborately painted with a design that included a coach-and-four. After a time the sign was repainted with a new design, but since the wood had been protected from wind and rain where the paint was thickest, it had weathered into a sort of bas-relief, and therefore both the old and the new designs are distinguishable in the sign today. It is preserved in the rooms of the Dedham Historical Society in Dedham, Massachusetts, to whom it was given by William R. Mann of Stoughton. Shortly before the death of Gertrude Cobb (last of the Cobb family to live at the former tavern) she and a sister endeavored to have the sign returned, as they wished to restore the old taproom, for reasons of sentiment. The curators of the Dedham Historical Society held a meeting on the matter and decided that the sign must be retained by the Society. It hangs on a wall in the basement of the Society's building in Dedham square, and on it is a card with the following inscription:

Old Swing Sign
formerly hung in front of
The Cobb Tavern
Cobb's Corner
Sharon, Mass.
given by William R. Mann

On the sign, which is quite faded, is painted a horse, and under the horse the words, "J. Cobb." The older design, still visible underneath, including a coach-and-four, and beneath it the words, "Jonathan Cobbs", the first name being abbreviated thus:

JON^aN COBBS

At the time that Jonathan Cobb took over and enlarged the tavern, the Revolutionary War, though it had been won on the field of battle, was still being fought verbally wherever men of strong mind (and sometimes stronger breath) gathered to discuss the affairs of the time. Report has it that Jonathan ruled his taproom with an iron hand, as he probably had to do if a respectable house was to be maintained.

AN EARLY POST OFFICE

The history of Cobb's Tavern as a United States Post Office begins with the appointment of Jonathan Cobb as Postmaster of East Sharon in 1819.

The Post Office was established at the Tavern July 1 of that year according to the History of Norfolk County (Vol.1), which then adds that on June 3, 1841, the name of the office at Cobb's Tavern was changed to East Sharon. Two old signs, one reading "Post Office", the other "East Sharon", are still in the Tavern.

Jeremiah Gould, in his "Annals of Sharon, Mass.", published

in 1830, says "Cobb's Tavern....was the Post Office to which the daily mail was brought by stage over the Boston to Taunton Turnpike. Once a week the mail was sent from here to the center of the town." Gould later amplifies this by saying: "A mail is carried over the road....every day, which is opened at the office situated at the northeast corner of the town (Cobb's); and a cross mail is carried once a week through the middle of the town and opened at the Centre office." Sharon had 1000 residents in 1819, when the Post Office was established.

The Post Office Department might frown at the suggestion of a combined barroom and Post Office today, but in earlier times every local Tavern was a common meeting place, and was the logical place for the mail for that reason as well as for the more obvious one - it was the stopping-place for the stage coach that carried the mail sack.

The Boston Globe of Sunday, Aug. 6, 1905, in an article concerning the Tavern, contributed something to the record of its term as a Post Office.

"Among the historic roadside inns in New England", said the Globe, "none have a more interesting history than has Cobb's Tavern in East Sharon....In 1819 Jonathan Cobb was appointed Postmaster for Sharon, the mail at that time being brought to his office in stage coaches. In the distribution of the mail among the people of the town the school children were each given letters to deliver on their way to school. This system of delivery was continued until the establishment of a Post Office at Sharon Center.

"After the death of Jonathan Cobb, his youngest son Warren

Cobb was appointed to succeed his father as Postmaster at East Sharon in 1841. The latter died in 1895, since which time the Post Office at East Sharon has been abolished and the tavern closed to the public."

An obituary published on the day following Warren Cobb's death stated that he was the third oldest Postmaster in the United States at the time of his death (he was 74). He had been appointed by President Andrew Jackson.

BOSTON BICYCLE CLUB

The members of the famous Boston Bicycle Club, which at this writing (1954) still pay a visit to the Tavern every year, used to make their first stop here in the old days on their annual "wheel around the Hub". Today's few remaining members make the tour by automobile.

In 1950 Willard H. Fobes of Annisquam, Mass., wrote:

"Much interest was taken in the dear old hostelry by riders of bicycles in the early days of that sport, and the annual "wheel around the Hub", led by the late Dr. W. G. Kendall, gave Cobb's Tavern a very considerable publicity. In 1886, at the age of 24, I was a member of the Dorchester Bicycle Club, riding a 55-inch wheel. Dinner at the Tavern was a frequent occurrence. I shall never forget the exhilarating ride through the Blue Hills of Milton, but the Tavern itself was the chief attraction of the outing....including the long-disused bar room.

"In due time the company was ushered into the dining room, low-ceilinged, cool and comfortable. The food was homelike, and the surroundings unique."

If the Tavern's early registers could be located--and

perhaps they will be some day--there is little doubt that many a famous name would be found thereon. A register kept by Postmaster Warren Cobb (which may have pre-dated Warren's own activities in its earlier pages) is believed to have disappeared one day many years ago during the excitement of the annual visitation of the Boston Bicycle Club (though it is not implied that any of the club members necessarily were involved in the disappearance). This particular register, at least, probably still exists, for reference is made to it in a newspaper article Feb. 28, 1932, when a reporter evidently had access to its pages, for he drew therefrom enough data for nearly a column--though without stating where he had seen the elusive book. The present owner of Cobb's Tavern thought he was on the track of the book in 1952, but the trail petered out. Excerpts from the newspaper article are quoted later on in this manuscript.

MASONS AND MUSIC LOVERS

The Boston Bicycle Club was only one of many organizations that met at Cobb's Tavern, and history of a sort was made there from time to time. The nation's oldest musical organization, The Old Stoughton Musical Society (still in existence today) had its first meeting in the tavern Nov. 12, 1804, when the society was organized. A booklet devoted to the society's history, published in 1929 by Stoughton Printing Company, Stoughton, Mass., recites this fact, and contains an old photograph of the Tavern.

One of the most venerable of Masonic Lodges, the Rising Star Lodge of Stoughton, held meetings at Cobb's Tavern for several years, and the Masonic Hall which Jonathon Cobb built

within the tavern for the Masons' use is still intact, though it was divided many years ago by a light partition into two bedchambers. A history of Rising Star Lodge prepared in 1949 by William B. Henry, then Master of the Lodge, says in part, "March 15, 1810 the men of Stoughton were out-voted and the Lodge was moved to Canton, meeting at the house of Amos Upham until July 28, 1814, when they again moved to the house of John Savels of Sharon, and remained there about a year. Again September 14, 1815, they held their first communication at the house of Jonathon Cobb, known as Cobb's Tavern, and here they remained until January 22, 1818, when they returned to Rising Star Hall at Capen's Tavern."

Later in the Tavern's history, the old Masonic Hall came to be known by the family as "the ballroom" and was used for such activities as the name suggests. It also chances to have been a listening-post from which a rather noteworthy proposal of marriage was heard by members of the family and thereby preserved for us.

HISTORIC PROPOSAL

About 1836, when a stone viaduct was being built in Canton for the railroad, a construction engineer named John Duff stayed at Cobb's Tavern while working on the project. Duff became enamoured of Keziah Cobb, one of Jonathon Cobb's daughters, and finally proposed marriage.

The proposal was made in the upstairs parlor. This room is separated from the old Masonic Hall, or ballroom, by only a thin partition. They clearly heard the importuning of Mr. Duff, and Keziah's firm refusal.

Duff was a persistent chap, however, and perhaps the viaduct took a long time to build; at any rate, Keziah finally, at a somewhat later date, consented to become Mrs. Duff. This appears to have been a source of great grief for Jonathon, who on his deathbed, is said to have exhorted all who loved Keziah to take care of her, for "That Duff will never come to anything, I am sure." Engineering was a doubtful profession in those days, and railroading even more so. But Duff did better than Jonathon feared, for he became vice president of Union Pacific Railroad, and was one of those honored men who drove the golden spike that connected the East with the West when the two great railroads were joined. He also became wealthy, and packages from "Auntie Duff" arrived frequently at Cobb's Tavern.

CIRCUS SLEPT HERE

As for the circuses whose members stayed at Cobb's Tavern, the most complete record of their doings seems to be set down in the mysteriously missing account book of the late Warren Cobb.

A local newspaper in 1932 speaks of the account book as having been "turned up recently," but cautiously fails to mention just where it has turned up; and there consequently is no way of telling from this where the book then was, or might now be. Post Office affairs, as well as the circuses, are mentioned.

"As late as the Civil War every letter mailed at Sharon was registered in this long-columned account book," says the newspaper.

"Several circuses came to Sharon during the time this book was kept - Van Amburgh's Menagerie, Howe's Trans-Atlantic Circus and G. F. Bailey's. Later on, in 1872, Howe's Circus became 'The Great London Circus and Menagerie of Trained Animals.'

"Mr. Cobb did his own personal bookkeeping in the Government blank book, too. One pathetic entry on Dec. 10, 1866, was a payment to "Withington for Mother's coffin, \$3500."

"On April 3, 1867, he was in Boston, the fare for himself and his wife for the round trip being \$1.80. They went to the 'theatricals' while they were in town, and took Lizzie and Ella with them, but the whole bust at the theatre cost only \$1.00 for the four of them.

"May 1, 1868, Howe's Circus came through, and left \$212.85 with Postmaster Cobb. The menagerie pulled in on June 4, and got out with only \$248.48 to pay. Many a circus would be glad to get through a town with only that much of bills today.

"The people were lodged everywhere; Mrs. Knowles took six of the performers and executives; a whole lot of them slept in the barn--and they all boarded with the postmaster.

"The performers were bedded up two and two; Gertrude and Bessie, Clark and Henriques, Seaver and Watson, Gregory and Harrison, Noble and Lady. He entered them all solemnly on his blank-book register, and put them to bed in the barn. He noted calls for 4, for '5½ and 6½'.

"He listed the hay and the feed for horses, mules and ponies, the food for 88 men who composed the whole crew of the show--and who cost their employers only \$132--five children who ate at half price, and the rent of the lot on which the tents were set up.

"Van Amburgh's 'Golden Menagerie and Great Moral Exhibition' was there on June 3, 1868. It was a bigger show; it carried 104 men, and they got a reduced boardbill price,

perhaps on that account. Anyway they ate for \$1.25 a day; just the same price as a bushel of oats.

"The last circus to come, it seems, was the Stone and Murray show on Sept. 13, 1872. Unfortunately, the 50 years since then have rendered this circus story illegible. Dr. Cobb's writing also had become minute and a little trembly.

"The final entry in the book is the draft of a notice: 'Wanted--Norfolk County Agricultural Society--500 new LIVE members. Please send in your name to the subscriber, Warren Cobb, soliciting Committee for the town of Sharon.'

"Times haven't changed so very much."

Thus ended the article in the local newspaper.

An old circus poster, printed in two colors from wood blocks, may still be seen on the wall of the taproom, and though it has suffered somewhat from age, the exciting acts of the performers are clearly depicted, and it is still possible to read under the printed line "WILL EXHIBIT AT," the pencilled words: "COBB'S TAVERN, EAST SHARON, MASS., on Tuesday, Sept. 8th, 1846." The circus grounds were a few hundred yards from the building and the location is still identified by an oval depression in the ground, some 200 feet across. Recollections of older members of the family make it fairly certain that this was the location of the circus grounds.

It would take more than a friendly disposition on the part of the guests to accommodate 125 of them in the house now, however. Several outbuildings that had been added from time to time as the business increased do not exist today; one wing of the main building has been removed, and the quarters over

the barn, once used for extra customers, no longer are in condition to receive guests.

A row of granite hitching posts, each with a wrought-iron pin in the top, borders the front of the Tavern. There is nothing to show where the horses may have been watered, but presumably it was at a trough somewhere near the well from which all of the water used in connection with the establishment was drawn. This well is believed to be intact, but it was filled with refuse and covered over nearly twenty years ago. There is nothing to indicate the location of the old well, but it is reliably believed to be close to the house, directly between the sun room on the south end, and the street. Old timers recall that it was here that the wagons of the Ames Shovel Works in Easton were halted daily so that their horses might be watered.

The intent of the present owners is simply to preserve and to some extent restore the buildings, while making certain concessions to comfort and convenience. Whether or not the Tavern at Cobb's Corner will have any future history worth recording remains to be seen.

F. S. TOBEY
41 Bay Road, Sharon, Massachusetts
January 1, 1955